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U.S. Blames New Form of Heroin For Outbreak of Overdose Deaths

By JOEL BRINKLEY
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 27 — An unusually potent and dangerous new form of Mexican heroin is being spread rapidly across the United States, Federal drug enforcement officials say. They assert that it has led to dozens, perhaps hundreds, of deaths by overdose, as well as to thousands of injuries in the last year.

The new heroin, which users call black tar because it resembles roofing tar in color and consistency, is increasingly dominating the nation's heroin markets. It is now sold in 27 states, up from four in 1983, according to officials of the Federal Drug Enforcement Administration.

It is blamed for causing the first general increase in overall heroin use in more than five years, in part because its low price has forced down other heroin prices.

The drug agency says black tar sells in some areas of the country for one-tenth the price of the heroin previously available, even though purity levels are as much as 40 times higher.

"It's a very serious problem and it's getting worse," John C. Lawn, head of the Drug Enforcement Administration, said in an interview. "Nineteen eighty-six is not going to be a good year for us."

Simplified Process Used

The drug agency says the substance is manufactured and distributed by a new combination of amateur Mexican processors and smugglers, frustrating law-enforcement officials accustomed to investigating Mexico's more conventional drug-trafficking groups.

Farmers in the states of Durango, Sinaloa and Sonora in northern Mexico are processing it themselves from their own opium poppy crops, using a simplified process that accounts for the new heroin's unusual appearance and high purity as well as its low price.

In the United States, black tar sells on the street for as little as \$2.50 for an average-size single dose of about 10 milligrams. Conventional Mexican

heroin sells for about \$24 a dose.

The increasing availability of black tar is leading to a nationwide decline in prices for all types of heroin, according to a Drug Enforcement Agency report published earlier this week. "Some areas are reporting decreases of 25 to 35 percent in the last quarter alone," the report said.

Unlike the powdered heroin that has been sold in the United States for many years, black tar is difficult for dealers to dilute because it is almost solid. As a result, it is often sold to users at purities of 90 percent or more. Typically, it is 60 to 70 percent pure, while conventional Mexican heroin usually ranges from 2 to 6 percent in purity.

Black tar is soluble in water and it dissolves when heated. Users inject it and inhale it, the drug agency said.

'Far More Overdose Deaths'

Because of the extraordinary potency of the substance, Mr. Lawn said, drug agency officials are "seeing far more overdose deaths."

"There were five deaths in Boston just recently," said David L. Westrate, who heads the drug agency's operations division.

Last year there were about 50 heroin overdose deaths in Portland, Ore., and "you can pretty safely say that's all black tar," said Thomas Locke, an official of the Federal Bureau of Investigation assigned to the drug agency.

Statistics from the Federal Government's Drug Abuse Warning Network show that from 1981 to 1985 the number of admissions to hospital emergency rooms for heroin-related cases increased 62 percent in 12 major cities where significant sales of black tar have been reported. Among those cities were Boston, Chicago and Detroit.

In 15 other cities where the substance is not known to be sold, including New York and Baltimore, such admissions for heroin-related cases increased by 32 percent over the same period.

Hospitals in San Francisco reported

199 heroin-related admissions in 1981. The number rose to 784 in 1984, when black tar first started appearing, and it increased again last year, to 1,084.

Mr. Locke said the total number of deaths caused by black tar was difficult to measure because, to a medical examiner conducting an autopsy, the new heroin's chemical composition appears the same as that of any other heroin. But he estimated that "at the least" the number of deaths caused by overdoses of black tar last year was in the dozens. The Government stopped collecting drug-related death statistics several years ago.

Around the United States, about 500,000 people are believed to be heroin addicts and perhaps two million others use the drug occasionally. Those estimates have remained stable since 1980.

But the drug agency's report said that now, largely because of black tar, an increasing use "by individuals in the middle-income and high-income brackets seems to be a developing trend." The report added, "This fact appears to substantiate a suspected growth in the general heroin population."

Government surveys to substantiate that presumption will not be available until this summer.

The report said the drug agency had found that some local law-enforcement officers overlooked black tar, failing to recognize it as heroin because of its unusual appearance.

Even when arrests are made, the report said, state prosecutors, bound by laws that assess minimal penalties for possession of small amounts of drugs, often do not prosecute for possession of the substance because "the amounts encountered are usually small."

With black tar overtaking other types of heroin, Mexico has become the largest exporter of heroin to the United States in the last two years, supplying more than one-third of the 13,000 pounds believed to be consumed annually in this country, the State Department reported last month. The rest comes from Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Southeast Asia.